

THE WILSON BULLETIN

A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE OF ORNITHOLOGY

Published by the Wilson Ornithological Club

Vol. XLVII

DECEMBER, 1935

No. 4

Vol. XLII (New Series) Whole Number 173

RIM ROCK AND SOLITAIRE

BY P. B. PEABODY

That picturesque yet highly exaggerated figure wherein Mr. Trippe once described the song of the Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*) became for me, once, a fascinating lure to Wyoming wilds. The prospect of long rides beneath clear skies amid rock masses, over deep-lying gorges resplendent with flowers and resonant with song, so gripped me that, fairly before I realized it, I found myself domiciled in a little cabin at the rear of a church in Newcastle, Wyoming.

One radiant October morning a few weeks later, after staging across fifty miles of alternating sage plain and bull pine studded canyon-gorge, passing by picturesque, lone Inyan Kara, skirting, finally, the deep, sloping talus of venerable Sundance Mountain. I landed at the village of Sundance. It was a paradisaic place, nestling against the northeastern bosses of the Bear Lodge. A mile wide area to the west gave outlet, behind fringes of willows, to the spring fed waters of the Bear Lodge and of Sundance Mountain.

Next morning I sauntered down to the odd, deserted church, far down the mesa. On its weathered porch I soon stood transfixed, with every nerve a-tingle. Eyes went sweeping up the steeps of the northward bench of the Bear Lodge. Quaintly weazened cedars, writtled into the grotesque forms that Dore once so loved, were foiling the sombre masses of young bull pines. Here and there, amid the scattered talus, there peered gaunt, jutting crags. Far up the slopes there towered the primeval pines. Their dark green tops cameoed the clear sky; while many a blanched top bespoke the deadly work of the tiny beetles that were already so rapidly converting whole masses of ponderosa pines into festering, shattered, falling, and fallen personifications of the Abomination of Desolation. And then, as I ardently looked and listened, as if in token that life and beauty everywhere shall ultimately triumph over death and decay, suddenly there stole forth from somewhere up the heights, mysteriously, delicately, vibrantly, a rippling song that seemed to know little of limit or of tiring. It was the song of the Solitaire.

Thereafter, I heard it often. Wherever there were rim-rock, cedar, and bull-pine, right there often echoed the Solitaire song. One heard it from January to May; and again from August until January. For, the Solitaire is resident. Like all true residents he is ever hardy, and unchangeably cheerful. No storm can silence him, no cold benumb, no heat over-power. When fog masses hurtle tumultuously across the muffled crags, right there masterfully sings the Solitaire in fullest nuptial ecstasy. The song trickles vibrantly downward through the hiss and roar of the storm, among the pines, the devoted pair falling and rising, over and below each other, high in air. It is amid such environs, as if in mastery over storm fury, that the mating time melodies of this rarest of "thrushes" bear the most bewitching charm.

But, one must learn to see the Solitaire. That short flute note wherewith he calls his mate in love time, or his male companions in winter, is both ventriloquial and bewildering. No bird call is more tantalizing, more stubbornly baffling. Yet, by and by, as one listens intently, with many cranings of neck and stumblings of foot, at last one really sees him. "Frozen", he is crouching against the bark of a pine sapling of his own color. In a moment, with that characteristic "thrush" rigidity, he mounts the sapling. Here, with outstretched neck, he listens, and listens, apparently for another of his own kind. Meanwhile he watches, for the ever-persistent foe.

In winter one finds the Solitaire, ever, among the cedars. Not often is he to be found elsewhere. For here is his granary; here his hammock and his bed; and here his City of Refuge from sharp-shins and screech owls. And always, in the main, it is among the cedar clad rocks which crown the gorges that the Solitaire loves to dwell during the halcyon hours of his winter days. E. S. Cameron has considered the Solitaire to be only a wintral sojourner in the fastness of Montana. And I, also, once believed this eerie creature to be just a wintral habitant. But both of us were wrong. For when May comes with its scattered bebies of hurrying storm attendants, then does the Solitaire sink into silence—utter silence. And then do the sundry pairs begin to home-fly back to their castles in the air, along the margin, perhaps, of some canyon wall; or amid the numberless crannies of a rock seam in some little gorge; or even, amid the stumps of some small clearing among the pines. Or perhaps the nesting place may lie in a secluded bank which margins the storm stream that rages, betimes, down some narrow water-shed, on its way to the river and the sea. Here, at his nest location, the Solitaire has little to say. Like certain other of our western mountain dwellers, he has learned the value of



FIG. 33. Inyan Kara, a "mountain" with an elevation of 6,500 feet in Wyoming, on the western margin of the Black Hills, and a famous landmark in early history.



FIG. 34. Sundance Mountain lies across the valley that flanks the Bear Lodge Mountains. The erosion is at the southeast, where the mountain skirts the valley; note the talus at the base, right-hand. The southwest crest slopes gently and is heavily wooded with ponderosa pines, and a few deciduous trees. This is especially the haunt of the Solitaire. In the early days the Indians gathered at the southeast crest at sunrise to perform their mystical rites.

prudent silence. However, one whose ear has been trained to keenness may hear, once in a great while, just a stifled, distant call; or again more rarely still, a smothered reminiscence of the nuptial song may scatter its fragments amid the deepening dark of a summer evening.

Yet there is a call, apparently unknown to science, a strange, wierd, smothered, yet intensely vibrant warning cry, a barely audible "*Pur-r-v-v-e*". This caution call, which may be uttered by either sex, I first heard under a thrilling circumstance. I stood, once, among scattered pine stumps and a few isolated clumps of ground juniper on the Bear Lodge. I had just seen a single Sharp-tailed Grouse alight, with a subdued, fearsome, "*Whuck-whuck-whuck*". Statuesque, there the slender creature stood, for all of a minute, intently eyeing me. When the grouse flushed I followed it down a narrow gorge which broadened into a level area covered with small bur oak trees. Forty rods to the northward there lay the rim-rock verge of a narrow "pocket" canyon. Steeply walled it was, at the apex, with steep slopes leading down to the canyon-mouth. The heights were clad in tenderest willow and aspen greenery. Out from the canyon opening there swept a vista of rolling plains, with their outlines softened in the undulating air. Westerly frowned the Black Buttes. To the north, fifteen miles away, enwrapped in purple haze, lay beautiful, isolated Inyan Kara. One stood transfixed. Then, suddenly, out from the hidden mazes of the narrow canyon there came floating the *motif* of a Solitaire song. It was but a faint suggestion, yet that was quite enough.

But in just a moment, in quite the usual inconsequential way, a Solitaire came liting up over the rim-rock and straight toward the observer. But, midway of the bur oak area, it seemed to sense the intruding human, and swerved, a moment, in midair. Then the canny creature alighted in a little oak; and, instantly, there came rasping its way through the still morning air that previously unheard warning cry, that creepy, pervasive, nasal "*Pur-r-v-v-e*". For a few moments, then, bird and man stood still, eyeing each other, though a full hundred yards apart. Then, for just one unguarded moment, the human eye swerved from its focus; and, the bird had disappeared!

Down through the oak-brush-covered space there wound a whilom water-way. Its course wound, tortuously, between banks of earth. Toughened by root-fibre, the bank edges over-hung. Intently traversing the deepest of these sections, I came, at a sudden turn, upon a sitting Solitaire, my missing bird. Her four eggs lay in a rough nest of weeds, grasses, yarrow-blades, and rootlets. This rested *upon*, rather



FIG. 35. The nest of the Solitaire "under the turfy over-hang", with bird sitting. 1906.



FIG. 36. The nest of the Solitaire on a tiny rock-shelf, "deep sheltered by the ferns and poison ivy", in the Bear Lodge Mountains. Crook County, Wyoming, May, 1901.

than *in*, a hollow, right in the runway continually used by many a vole, white-footed mouse, and chickaree, winding in and out, under the turfy over-hang. Here, storm-fended, the Solitaire was brooding her treasures. Silently, steadily, she eyed me. And then, amid the falling rain, there was wrought out that mystery of gentling whereby the wildest of the wild grow tame, at last, in home-defense; when danger no longer threatens.

My very first occupied Solitaire nest was found in this very canyon. It was the work of a previous year, in June. The fretful caekling of a Western Sharp-shinned Hawk had led the camerist through endless mazes of undergrowth, straight across to a steep slope whereon a few tall birches grew amid pines and aspens. In one of these birches, upon a revamped nest of the always terrible red squirrel there lay five eggs of the no-less-terrible wiry hawk. Hardly had the sight of these very rare eggs rewarded one's wearisome climb before there was heard, from the far-opposite rock wall, which I had just left, the furtive song of a Solitaire—never before heard in June. Straight across, then, to the nesting-niche I went. The site was in a sheltered nook upon a shelf, snug and inaccessible. It held four oddly-spotted young, already full-feathered on that late June day. Their cradle was just a mat of the long pine needles that were lying everywhere about. As usual the parents of these awkward younglings were curiously apathetic during my study of their brood.

Just such another nest I later found, at sunset of another late June day. It was on a tiny shelf, half way up the steep slope of a very narrow water course, not very far from the little old dilapidated church. This nest was betrayed, as occupied nests of this species almost invariably are, by the flushing of the sitting bird. In this nest, sheltered by poison ivy, there crouched four spotted young.

Rough as are all Solitaire nests, but unique in its deep foundation of stout pine twigs, was a nest, many years old, that I once found in the very bottom of a pine stump in a clearing. It had been built upward to a ten-inch height, and it had a matted lining of plant fibre.

Uneanny is the Solitaire, especially in baby-time. Sitters cling closely to their nests, whether with eggs or with young. And Solitaire parents worry precious little about human presences near their nests. There is no outcry. Even the warning call made by most parent birds when nearing their nests with food is, with this unconventional creature, only a faint utterance, and even this is sometimes not to be heard at all. Yet, curiously enough, with all that apparent indifference, I



FIG. 37. An old nest of the Solitaire is located in the bottom of the pine stump in the clearing.



FIG. 38. A Solitaire's nest "among broken layers of porphyry" in a deep cleft of the Bear Lodge rim-rock. Crook County, Wyoming, May, 1901.

have never known Solitaires to come near their nests, with food, when a man was just nosing about.

Beautiful as are normal eggs of the Townsend's Solitaire, I once found an entire "set" of them that were of rarest beauty. The pearly, somewhat rosy ground tint was heightened by the boldness and the brightness of the warm, red-brown markings. And there were five of them, which is rare, indeed.

A single pair of Solitaires that I once knew evinced a rare susceptibility. These birds were undoubtedly the very pair that reared their young in 1905 in the little niche among rocks near the crest of the Bear Lodge. The nesting place they had chosen for 1906 was but a hundred feet further up, on the same flood groove. On the abnormally late breeding date of July 10 I was intent upon the perplexing ways of a pair of Canada Jays. Behind and beneath a solitary pine sapling, at the head of the narrow gorge, I was hiding from the jays. Then, of a sudden, straight down the slope from which my jays had disappeared, a subdued Solitaire song was heard. It must have been a female's love-song, while she was resting and feeding near her nest. Quickly I sighted her, as she sat on the lowest dead branches of a little pine. I watched her mate come, wing-poised, across from the opposite side of the narrow and shallow gorge to a spot beside the female. The wings of the eager creature relaxed, and began to quiver. Her beak opened wide to receive the morsel her mate had brought her. Instantly, the almoner passed out of sight; but his mate still sat where she was, placidly preening.

By experience, the watcher knew exactly what was going to happen. He dared not move his very eyes. In an instant he shrank to half his size. With wings in poise the female Solitaire glides downward, aslant, to the bottom of the slope, a hundred feet away; and she has instantly disappeared. But, I found her, a bit later, on a juniper shrouded shelf, back among the broken layers of porphyry. A tender-foot might have "rushed" her, instanter, but I just "froze", and watched! No miracle of words could possibly tell just how craft finally began to triumph over fear.

Two days went by. My camera was set up and left. Gradually, with infinite slowness, it was moved, nearer and nearer to the nesting spot; yet, always, in vain. At the critical moment, a drab shadow would be wafted from the nesting nook to some favored perching spot on the gaunt branch of a pine log; or to the lower twigs of a feeding tree. Then, while I crouched beneath my covert, burying my body among dead leaves and stems of bear-berry, the drab Lady would

come cautiously back, rod by rod, yard by yard, from one perch to another; until, at last one might almost foretell just what road she would take next, in going home. Then, more swiftly than the untrained eye might follow, she would have vanished out of space; and her bright eye would peer out at one from her half hidden eyrie. Finally, in near despair, I hid the camera just back of a blackened stump, behind a pine sapling. There I left it, for a while, "all set".

In due time the observer had crushed himself into shapelessness, among the rough herbage, but within reach of the holder-slide. And, there, scorched by a mounting sun, pinched by wandering ants, devoured by hungry deer-flies, he lay, a long, long time, waiting as only an enthusiast can wait! Cautiously, when the climactic moment came, the slide was slowly drawn, inch by inch, with a hand upreached. The noisy shutter elicited its closing. And, the ghost of a shadow went flitting, quick as thought, out from the covert, into the sunlight, and far away, down the steeps.

TOPEKA, KANSAS.

BEACH-COMBERS

BY BAYARD H. CHRISTY

A gently curving bay opens northeastwardly to the breadth of Lake Superior. To the left against the horizon extends the blue band of Keweenaw Point; its mountains, often undercut by mirage, seem to float in air; to the right lake and sky meet in a far line that is serrated and notched when the waters are tossed by storm. The bay swings inland between forest-crowned headlands of red sandstone. A long, low sand dune, extending from one promontory to the other, wind-built from behind, storm-beaten in front, falls abruptly to a narrow beach.

The crest of the dune is grown with harsh grass and beach peas; its landward slope is covered with red-berried kinnikinnick; beyond extends a ridged, sandy plain, sparsely grown with jack pines and norways, carpeted with huckleberry bushes that now, in early October, are aflame amidst faded brakes and dim gray mosses. Wavelets lap the beach and raise a gentle murmur. When the wind is offshore even the murmur fails; but when lake winds blow a heavy surf mounts and roars landward. The breadth of the beach, from the precipitous face of the dune to the inconstant margin of water, is not great—two, three, six paces, at most. The waves beat upon a firm, steep slope, and in places reach the very base of the dune; but, for the greater part, there is a level interval between of loose, dry sand.